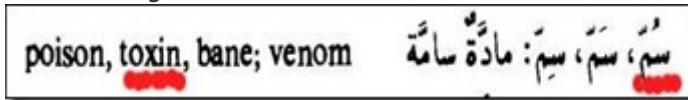
Hadith, ‘Ajwa Dates and Science

Other day a person, seemingly a Christian polemicist left me an email, challenging me on something which he thought was really a big deal. He quoted the following Hadith:
Narrated Sa’d: The Prophet said, "If somebody takes some 'Ajwa dates every morning, he will not be effected by poison or magic on that day till night." (Another narrator said seven dates). (Sahih Bukhari)
And then hurled the challenge;

> are you today ready to take this simple challenge and eat 7 Ajwa dates and then drink poison and survive ?

The response:
The unfortunate fact is that most people in our time think that just reading any translation of Hadith texts, they can lay hands upon, is quite enough to have a full grasp of it and they find themselves worthy enough to comment. The practice might have had some justification if Hadith -or for that matter any classical Islamic text- was in some dead language hardly known to even the followers of the religion as it happened with Judaism and Christianity.
A basic principle in studying any historical narration is to understand the environment and context in which it originated. While it may not be possible to find details as to when and why was some particular words were uttered, another reasonable way is to see the complementing narrations before looking to reach a conclusion.
Sa’d told of hearing Allah’s Messenger say, **“He who has a morning meal of seven ‘ajwa dates will not suffer harm that day through toxins or magic.”** (Bukhari, Hadith 5327 and Muslim, Hadith 3814)
‘Aisha reported Allah’s Messenger as saying, **“The ‘ajwah dates of al-‘Aliya contain healing, and they are an antidote (when taken as) first thing in the morning.”** (Muslim, Hadith 3815)
‘Aisha reported Allah’s Messenger as saying, **“The ‘ajwah dates of al-‘Aliya taken as the first thing in the morning, in the state of fasting; contain healing for all (kinds of) magic or toxins.”** (Musnad Ahmad, Hadith 23592)
Al-‘Aliya is the named applied to some villages a few miles east of Medina.
Narrated ‘Urwah: ‘**Aisha used to order to make a habit of or taking in regular intervals seven ‘ajwah dates, in the state of fasting for seven mornings.** (Musannaf Ibn Abi Shayba, Hadith 23945)
Now considering all these narrations it becomes clear that the benefits mentioned are for link to certain specifics.
1- It is about 'Ajwa dates from al-Aliya, a particular locality near al-Medina
2- The benefit is for eating them early in the morning breaking the night fast with it
3- It is for the one who eats them regularly as Aisha (RA) used to instruct people. Her instruction matters for she is one of the narrators of the Hadith in question.

Now let me explain a few things:
"The Poison/Toxin": The word actually used is "summ" which means, poison or toxin. The problem is some people think it is about instantly killing poisonous stuff. However the fact mention in Hadith that it benefits when taken as the first thing early in the morning and on regular basis itself establishes that it is about toxins, which are indeed poisonous and harmful to the body. Also see the following evidence.

poison, toxin, bane; venom سُمّ، سَمّ، سِمّ: مادّةٌ سامّة

Al-Mawarid Arabic-English Dictionary Dar el-Elm Lilmalayin, Beirut 1995 p.642

Ibn Qayyim in his Tibb al-Nabawi writes: **"For the people of al-Medina, dried dates are their staple like wheat is to other people. In addition, dried dates from the area of al-Aliyah in al-Medina are one of the best kinds of dates ... Dates are a type of fruit that is also used for its nutritional and medicinal value, being favorable for most bodies and for their role in strengthening the natural heat. Moreover, dates do not produce harmful wastes or excrement like other types of food and fruits. Rather, dates preserve the body wastes from being spoiled and from rotting, especially for those who are used to eating dried dates."** (Healing with the Medicine of the Prophet, Translated by Abd el-Qader bin Abd el-Azeez, Dar al-Ghadd al-Gadeed, al-Mansoura (Egypt), 2003 p.121)

Here are a couple of more narrations,
Narrated Sa'd: I suffered from an illness. The Messenger of Allah –may Allah bless him- came to pay a visit to me. He put his hands on my chest and I felt its coolness at my heart. He said: **"You are a man suffering from heart sickness. Go to al-Harith ibn Kaladah, brother of Thaqif. He is a man who gives medical treatment. He should take seven ajwah dates of Medina and grind them with their kernels, and then put them into your mouth."** (Sunan Abu DawudHadith 3875)

It is reported, though through a weak chain, that 'Ali –may Allah be pleased with him- said: **"And whoever eats seven 'ajwa dates every day it kills every disease in the stomach."**(Kanzul Ummal, Hadith 28472)

These show that they have healing effect against heart ailment and problems of the stomach.

And we have scientific evidence that dates protect arteries and lower the risks of heart attack. Cholesterol that causes many heart problems itself is a toxin. Moreover some of the ingredients of the dates are protective against digestive system related problems, e.g. dietary fiber helps eliminate human intestinal toxic substances, researchers suggest.

Magic: As to magic, there are two possibilities. If it is literally a reference to magic as it was and is known then we cannot actually say much about it in the light of modern scientific research. Western science has, to the best of my knowledge, only skeptical notions about it which do not have any real value. (We earlier discussed a similar case about the Evil-eye)

It may simply be a reference to some diseases caused by apparently unknown factors expressed this way especially taking into account the times in which the statement was made.

The word "Sihr" is so called as "it changes health and soundness

to disease" (see E.W. Lane's Lexicon Book I p.1316) and in that sense it is simply a reference to the something causing ailment like the word used to imply toxin poison and is hinted to by the word "or" used in many narrations. This might be a reference to certain radiations that adversely affect human body. And we know certain of the ingredients of dates like Calcium, magnesium, Selenium, Zinc, Vitamin C etc. are helpful against radiations.

Summary of the above:

The two things mentioned above are for dates in general and as clear from the Hadith reports the ‘ajwa dates from al-Aliya locality of al-Medina are even more beneficial especially in that particular environment.

With regards to toxins there is no doubt the dates are indeed curative. As to magic more research is possible however whatever is written above suffices to kill the skeptical notions about the Hadith. Those who doubt the Hadith have nothing to substantiate their view. We at least have fair amount of support in favor of our thesis.

The Hadith narrations say, 'ajwa dates from al-Aliya taken regularly as first thing in the morning breaking the fast -in spells of 7 successive days- is a cure against toxins, just as they are helpful as a preventive cure against heart and stomach problems.

LET ME TURN THE TABLES!

While the explanation above is quite enough for any ardent and reasonable observer, for the hate mongers from amongst the Christian missionaries I have a challenge on these lines. And the challenge is to drink the “any deadly thing” and stay unhurt. This is what the Bible promises putting the words into the mouth of Jesus –may Allah bless him.

“They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.” (KJV, Mark 16:18)

I always wonder how come missionary haters of Islam muster up the courage to talk about Islam. Don’t they ever turn back and have a look at their own house?

Acknowledgement: I am indebted to the invaluable help offered by brother Azhan Ahmad in bringing up this article.

Indeed Allah knows the best!